

# No Place for Women

## *Interpreting Civil War Battlefields*

"It is no place for women" was the constant refrain Sarah Palmer heard throughout her service as a Union Army nurse during the Civil War. Twentieth century visitors to a Civil War battlefield might be forgiven for thinking the same thing, since there is so little, if any, women's history discussed at these historic sites. Civil War battlefields have traditionally been regarded as masculine places. After all, it was men who fought the battles, men who risked injury, capture, or death. Few women were actually present at battles, and women — nurses, *vivandières*\*, civilians, and soldiers — who were in the middle of the war are often regarded as exceptions, extraneous to the central story of the battle. Staff at battlefield sites have felt comfortable interpreting tactics and maneuvers, regiments and officers to their visitors, believing that because they were interpreting the battle itself, they were covering the site's complete history. Even as other historical sites began delving into social, cultural, gender, and racial history, looking beyond "great men" and their stories, Civil War sites have continued to focus on campaigns rather than communities.

Including women's history at Civil War sites would entail parks rethinking about why and how they interpret the parks' significance. How do we make these national milestones relevant to people who have no interest in the Civil War, or even in American history? Compelling stories of endurance, courage, and strength are universal human qualities with no gender or racial barriers. If one talks about the siege of Petersburg as a story of endurance, one recognizes the civilians who survived that nearly 10-month ordeal as well as the soldiers, Union and Confederate. Moreover, individuals with no military experience can appreciate such character values without having to understand a left flank attack or the minutiae of military engineering.

One of the biggest obstacles to this new approach is an attitude within the National Park Service itself. Some people believe that women's history should only be interpreted at women's history parks, such as Women's Rights National Historical Park or Clara Barton National Historic

Site; they believe that if a park interprets women, it must exclude everything else. Those who continue to envision military action as the main story add women's history only as a sidebar, something on the periphery that can be taken away without being missed.

Once the need for a new strategy of interpreting Civil War sites has been acknowledged, other issues can be dealt with over time. For example, no park has the money to completely re-engineer its exhibits and audiovisual programs. But personal interpretive services can incorporate new ideas immediately. An electric map shows that details of military actions can be introduced by a park ranger who asks the visitors to keep in mind that these armies were made up of men—people just like us today who had left families behind at home, who worried about dying on the battlefield and about what their wives were doing to keep the family afloat, and that the battlefield was someone's farm, their wheat field, or peach orchard. This would give visitors who may not care about troop movements another way to approach the battlefield when they visit the actual site later. Temporary thematic exhibits (*Life in the Army*, for example) could outline a battle from different points of view — the general and the private, area residents and far away relatives of those on the field — and allow visitors to draw their own conclusions.

As public historic sites, battlefields should be interpreted, as much as possible, in terms of the entire history of their sites—the world the soldiers lived in, not only the ground they fought on, to interpret the battlefield in context, as part of the whole, not a single action or campaign. By interpreting the world the soldiers lived in, discussing the principles and beliefs they fought for—and not merely the ground they fought and died on—we would be reaching out to audiences previously ignored, because we would be recognizing the contributions of all Americans, not just soldiers, to the outcome of the conflict. Just as Sarah Palmer's endeavors proved, there has always been a place for women at Civil War battlefields. It has just taken the National Park Service a long time to find it.

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\* *Vivandières* were women unofficially attached to a regiment who performed various camp and nursing duties.